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# Pressing: Where the Objective Meets the Subjective

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*Pressing: Where the Objective Meets the Subjective*

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## Abstract

Through this essay I describe the theoretical and anthropological ideas that led to the creation of the *Cushing Series*. An interest in the obsession with photography in popular culture leads to an understanding of the permeation of structured reasoning past scientific research and into everyday life. Taking evidence from photography, and philosophy of science I establish the limitations of structured reasoning, both as a way of perceiving the world and as an understanding of identity, and define surface and frame as its physical representation. Using Sartre's existential theory and phenomenological anthropology I then describe the infinite subjective existence of the individual and establish its sculptural mode of representation. Ethnographic details, and personal experience then serve to explain a variety of aesthetic relationships between the two parts and reveal an imbalance in Western society's accepted ways of knowing and being.

## Introduction

"The person who thinks that everything that is not photographed is lost, as if it had never existed, and that therefore, in order really to live, you must photograph as much as you can, and to photograph as much as you can you must either live in the most photographable way possible or else consider photographable every moment of your life" (Calvino 43-44).

In 1958, Italo Calvino questioned the underlying ideas that create western society's drive to photograph. Today, as the number of images grows exponentially and individual identity becomes expressed and created through images on social media, Calvino's

considerations are increasingly relevant. What does it mean to think that what is not photographed is lost, and how does that shape the ways in which we go about living?

Through the lens of anthropology, existential philosophy and personal experience I explore the various relationships between self, identity and society that come about within a culture fixated on scientific modes of knowing. In *Cushing Series*, using the physical language of photography, painting, and sculpture I then create formal representations of my findings that simultaneously question divisions between physical reality and conceptual human thought and feeling.

### **Photography as surface**

A photograph frames, freezes and presents ephemeral reality. The camera directs attention and isolates subjects from their context both in time and space. Once a photograph is taken, a moment can be relocated into another time and place. Due to photography's structured perception, however, a photographed subject loses action and becomes defined by a static moment. This desire to understand by obtaining, freezing, and decontextualizing exemplifies much broader traditions of thinking and knowing in modern western society. Photography presents merely a symptom of a particular mode of relating to reality.

Edward Sapir's theory on structuralism in anthropology discusses similar notions of perceiving and understanding through structures on a broader ideological level. His theory uncovers how the ideology that leads to the obsession with photography, also applies more abstractly to the scientific understanding of other people and cultures.

In anthropology and many other fields of science, categorization allows for intentional and detailed direction of attention. Deductive reasoning creates parsimony in making claims for understanding and predicting human behavior. But Sapir continues in saying that, “claiming truth in structures underestimates the complexity of experience; yet frees us from the “unmanageable vastness of our immediate perceptions” (Preston 1115). The desire to understand and communicate lies in constant tension with the impossibility of describing or showing the infinite details of experience. The process of deduction or objective thinking is a process of flattening the multi-dimensionality of reality.

The tendency to impose structures exists in the way our culture upholds photographs as ultimate evidence and truth. I am interested in the prevalence of objectivity in photography for two reasons. First, photography reveals how scientific ways of thinking permeate through layers of culture and the individual to affect even intimate and mundane aspects of living. Second, through photography this idea materializes into physical qualities of surface and frame that I employ in my artistic explorations.

Photography physical represents the limitations of structured thinking. Photographs are only an immediately perceivable surface. They hold a direct connection to reality, yet beyond the surface there lays unperceivable depth of time and movement. To think that what is not photographed is lost is to dismiss the existence of this depth. It is to think that only what comes to the surface of photographs exists. Through anthropology and existentialism, I aim to understand and then develop compositions that express how these ideologies infiltrate intimate being.

## Existentialism and pressing

In Jean-Paul Sartre's book *Nausea*, the protagonist Roquentin struggles with this very dilemma - the inability through human reasoning to embody the fullness of reality. He ponders on what lies beyond the surface of the chestnut tree. He can see the chestnut tree and he knows what one looks like but his description never reaches the true particularity of *this* chestnut tree. Roquentin can know the definition of a chestnut tree but he can never know or experience what it is like to be the chestnut tree. Through this scene Sartre delineates a clear distinction between the two ways of knowing. (Sartre 127)

For *Cushing Series* I created pieces made up of physical representations of these two ways of



Figure 1 Mariana Parisca *Cushing Series- and sooner or later he believed it himself*, 40 x 24 inches, 2015

knowing (figure 1). I began by using painting frames with various fabrics stretched on them to stand in for the objectivity. I utilize the existing devices of painting and its role as predecessor to photography as a way to represent surface and to connote ideas of structured thinking. The paint is applied on the surface. The painting frame presents and divides.

The second part of the pieces, represent elusive subjectivity. I constructed these by molding various materials including, plaster, wax, resin, fabric, and plastic in the frame. The

viewer sees only the surface of these pieces, yet the piece creates a sensation of being in the surface and that beyond exists an unperceivable depth.

Sartre continues, “the chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes” (Sartre 127). This quote developed an image in my mind that influenced the making of this work. The word pressing describes his recognition of the limitations of his subjectivity. Their subjective existences push up against each other. Revealing and understanding takes place as the surface areas in contact expand through pressing. This inescapability becomes visibly manifested in my series through the flatness of the inset pieces that creates a sense that the material is pressing up against some sort of boundary to the outside world.

The inset materials also press against the edges of the painting frames however. This pressing shows a similar yet more internal struggle between objectivity and subjectivity. Through the use of photography in social media we see how individuals define not just their surroundings but also themselves through the surfaces of photography. The individual and society apply objective mode of defining to the understanding of the individual, creating a set of norms that make up a role or identity that is to be filled. Objectivity defines not only an exterior world but also the intimate idea of self. Sartre calls this mode of relating to the self, which I represent through the frames as, the for-oneself, while he calls experiential being the in-oneself. The borders where the two parts meet show a second instance of pressing where the subjectivity of the individual presses up against the defined surfaces or boundaries of their identity.

In the title of the series, “Cushing” refers to the anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing who first utilized participant observation in his ethnographic work. In participant observation, the anthropologist personally takes on the societal role of the subject he aims to understand. He studies through the act of pressing. The ing ending of Cushing refers to a verb or an action. There is a phenomenological aspect to participant observation that places importance on the experience of the individual. The anthropologist knows through experience rather than distanced objective observation. (Cushing)

In *Cushing Series* I take a phenomenological approach by creating inset pieces that, through their fluid qualities, recall the process of pouring and communicate the unfinished action of filling or pressing. Of course there are limitations to this phenomenological approach because the anthropologist can never truly shed their own frame of identity or the unique qualities of their subjectivity. Yet during Cushing’s time in the 1900’s, and still today criticism of participant observation reveals the imbalance in the ways of knowing caused by the discrediting of knowing through intimate being.

## **Forgetting the Frame**

With the establishment of these two pieces I moved on to explore the ways in which these two ways of knowing related to each other through composition, contrast and materiality. In Calvino’s quote, he poses two possibilities; I however aim to expand upon this.



Through the use of titles inspired by ethnographic work done by others and myself, I allude to a diversity of humanistic content behind seemingly formal work. In this way, I work within the same lineage of artists as Louis Bourgeois. Like in her series *The Personages*, the multiplicity of my pieces that aims to reveal a variety of possibilities of the self. (Strick)

This multiplicity directly opposes the tendency in western psychology to set a notion of a singular norm from which definitions of disorders arise (Gaines). Many psychological anthropology studies reveal how this idea of a norm becomes

institutionalized and effects individuals on a broad scale (Gaines). Through my pieces however, I aim to explore a certain relationship to the frame from which the idea of neutrality emerges on a personal level.

Sartre claimed that the subjective self was ultimately free; that despite restrictions of physical conditions, in their own minds individual can make what they want of their reality.

To a certain extent I agree. Partially due to the inability to cross into another's subjectivity, individuals are free to think and feel as they wish. Despite individuals fitting into certain roles within cultures and their society, anthropology

has shown that they can also practice agency in various ways. The fluidity and organic nature of the materials that compose the insets represents this freedom. In *he watched*,



Figure 2 Mariana Parisca *Cushing Series- he watched, forgetting his eyes*, 24 x 40 inches, 2015

*forgetting his eyes* (figure 2) especially, the black fabric flows comfortably within the white frame.

In pieces like *and sooner or later he believed it himself* (figure 1), however, the inset pieces react to the pressures of the frame. Subjectivity exists in deflection to objective constraints. The thickness of the frame on the top creates a sensation of squeezing within the bottom of the inset plaster. This frame, or identity comes with a sense of weight that permeates into the freedom of subjective being. The frame and the inset take on a similar aesthetic quality, blurring the distinction between the two.

In contrast, in *he watched, forgetting his eyes* (figure 2) the relationship between the frame and the inset is much looser. The fabric flows with a freedom that matches the type of freedom Sartre speaks of. The proportion of the space within the frame to the amount of fabric lacks a sense of deflection that causes a forgetting of the frames constraining presence. It blends in with the wall creating a situation in which the individual fails to see how subjectivity is shaped by objective conditions and therefore claims a neutrality or truth to their interpretations.

This forgetting of the frame, extends past the individual and manifests itself in a variety of ways. In many fields, postmodernism concerns itself with the dismantling of this illusion. In art, the anonymous, perfectly manufactured forms of minimalism hold this sense of neutrality. Artists like Eva Hesse and Rachel Whiteread, work against this tendency through their employment of formal qualities and minimalist aesthetic with the addition of the human trace. (Krauss)

In Alison Wylie's, philosophy of science and standpoint theory she questions the supposed neutrality of scientific data analysis by calling attention to the frameworks under which certain claims are made. In archeology for example, conditions of the study and archeologist such as, time period, social status, gender, and race, shape the conclusions archeologists make about limited data. Wylie understands the impossibility of doing research without a bias, however, and instead calls for archeologists to honestly present their biases, and points of view. The frame becomes part of the research and interpretive material presented to audiences. (Wylie)

In photography the position of the photographer, the photo paper, and the camera function as forgotten frames. In *Lighter* (figure 3), Tillmans' photographs reveal no clear subject matter, only gradients of colors. Tillman does so to draw viewers away from looking into the photograph and instead drive attention towards the act of photographing



Figure 3, Wolfgang Tillmans, *Lighter* 2013

and presenting the photograph. Wrinkles in the photo paper disrupt the illusion that photographs usually create. By reminding viewers of the material properties of photo-paper that usually conceptually disappears, Tillmans achieves in a material way what Wylie called for in archeology- the inclusion of the framing devices that normally fade into oblivion due to assumed neutrality. (Tillmans)

We again arrive at the realization of the limitations of the photograph not only because it depicts frozen and decontextualized subjects, as discussed earlier, but also because it reveals only from a particular position and a certain mode of looking. In looking at a photograph Tillmans asks viewers to hold off considering the subjects depicted in order to see the manner in which the photographer depicts. Of course one could argue that the plexi-glass boxes in this series function as a new overlooked framing device. The inclusion of context of looking as framing device could extend infinitely.

In the *Cushing Series*, the insets and their frames are presented with equal importance. Existence lies not in the inset pieces or the frames alone, but in the relationship and tension between the two. The unconventional manner in which they hang on the wall causes viewers to step back and consider the architecture of the building as yet another framing device (figure 4). Here the stepping back draws parallels with zooming out from the subjectivity of the individual, to their role in society, to culture.



Figure 4 Mariana Parisca *Cushing Series* - she worried that upon arrival she would not recognize the contents of her suitcase, 24X40 inches, 2015

Like Tillmans, in my previous work, *Houses* (figure 5), I reference the frame by calling attention to the act of viewing in photography through the use of four almost still videos that include the body movements of the photographer. The conceptual subject matter of the piece zooms out, now encompassing not just the house, but also the

relationship between house and viewer.

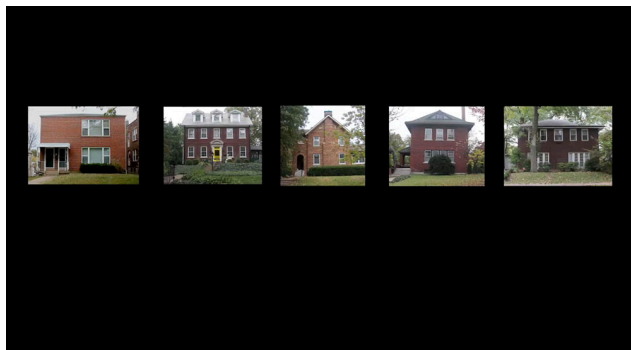


Figure 5, Mariana Parisca *Houses*, still from video 2014

Unlike Tillmans piece in which there is no subject other than photography itself, in *Houses*, viewers experience this zooming out through subject matter that holds political and social significance

and affect. The houses connote an upper-middle-class, suburban, American, socioeconomic status through their physical characteristics. These aspects add another

layer of meaning to the act of watching. The viewer's body now becomes uncomfortably intrusive and voyeuristic. The distance from the houses suggests the status of the viewer as an outsider who looks in with desire for the stability, and comfort of the American dream.

## The House as frame

Architecture presents another instance where formal qualities cannot be separated from societal and human meaning. Beliefs and ideas of our place in society become physically manifested in the forms of architecture, and in turn the forms of architecture affect the ways in which inhabitants live and think about their identities. The compositions of my pieces allude to architectural form in order to draw up these connotations.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard expresses this extensively. He resists the scientific tendency to create divisions between what is reality and what is of the human imagination. He describes the house acting as a cultural framework for the creation of the individual both literally through its physical reality, and conceptually through the idea of the house or what Bachelard calls the oneiric house. "There exists for each one of us an oneiric house,

a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past."

(Bachelard 37)

Rachel Whiteread's work explores similar ideas. By creating a life-size cast of the inside of a house in the East end of



Figure 6 Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993



London for *House* (figure 6), she calls attention to the negative space of the home. She concretizes the ephemeral memories and presence of human existence that takes place within. The spaces in-between, often ignored due to their supposed lack of existence, become physical and present. The viewer can no longer ignore them or makes claims of the division between real and imagined. (Krauss)

Through my own previous photography (figure 7) and video work, I provide a plain but close look at the interior of my own living space. The spaces and objects do not need



Figure 7 Mariana Parisca, *Untitled*, 2015

to be ascribed with meaning; they already hold affect and significance on their own. Through my semiconscious daily activities I arrange objects, make marks on the walls and floor, and leave remnants of my body's presence. Through

experiential living I infuse the structure of the home with marks of my subjectivity and my cultural identity. The home functions as a structure, it delineates a particular place in society, and simultaneously holds intricate memories of elusive presence. It is the place where the for-oneself and in-oneself meet.

With this in mind, the immigrant-experience takes on new significance. Displacement becomes more than the physical movement of objects and body. It is felt as the disruption of the harmony between subjective and objective being that the home

embodies. The identity of the individual, and structures used for understanding the world change drastically. The immigrant must find a new way of fitting their subjectivity into a range of ways from the broad level of their role within this new society, to the way they dwell in their new home. In my exploration of the existential meaning of displacement I look to other artists, like Mona Hatoum, and Doris Salcedo, and Rachel Whiteread, who also express the destabilizing effects of displacement through physical disjunction. (Bradley)

*In, she worried that upon arrival she would not recognize the contents of her suitcase* (figure 4), I express this instability from personal experience. The darkness of the frame in this piece has a sense of uncertainty deriving from the unfamiliarity with the new cultural identity. The wax inset, seems unaware or unconcerned with the edges. I position the inset piece off center, destabilizing the composition. It reaches to the left, in remembrance or desire of something beyond this frame, a past existence in another cultural frame. These qualities reveal a state of new fitting after displacement. As I allude to in the title of this piece, the physical challenge of moving belongings and bodies is loaded with complex emotional and existential struggle.

The immigrant experience, however, is not the only instance of an existential instability. In Sartre's book *Nausea*, he similarly describes the anxiety produced by the realization of the separation and disjunction of the for-oneself and the in-oneself through the experience of time. The protagonist Roquentin says, "but for me, there is neither Monday nor Sunday: there are days which pass in disorder, and then, sudden lightning like this one. Nothing has changed and yet everything is different" (Sartre 54). His experience, or in-oneself being, feels shifts in the speed of the passing of time. Yet he



knows it is Sunday and he should perform certain appropriate behaviors. In *he watched, forgetting his eyes* (figure 2), this disparity shows through the contrast between the inset piece and the frame.



Figure 8 Mariana Parisca, "but when I disagreed with them, I was mad. It was like a side of me had to be forgotten", 2015

## Secrecy

The ethnographic account of a woman, Catarina, living in Brazil inspired the last piece (figure 8), "*but when I disagreed with them, I was mad. It was like a side of me had to be forgotten*" (Biehl 8). The

anthropologist João Biehl,

investigates her past and describes the health care system in Brazil in order to explain how she came to be abandoned in Vita, a desolate institution where "unproductive individuals" are left to await their deaths. Biehl reveals how the mental health facilities ignore Catarina's subjectivity, reducing her to a diagnosis as a schizophrenic. From then on, society dismisses Catarina's desires and claims to sanity as merely symptoms of her mental illness. (Biehl)

The current approach to mental health, which derives from an American neoliberal ideology, promotes a mode of attending to people that lacks an awareness of their subjectivity and reduces people to their purpose or productivity. Catarina is seen solely as

her identity as a mentally ill patient. Her actions or phenomenology is suppressed. She becomes only surfaces and frame; an empty box.

This way of attending to people reflects the structural mode of perceiving described in the beginning of the essay, which categorizes, decontextualizes, and freezes subjects. Catarina provides a powerful example of how this scientific approach infiltrates into the most essential and intimate aspects of living.

Yet “life that no longer has any value for society is hardly synonymous with a life that no longer has any value for the person living it” (Biehl 366). Catarina continues living in Vita. She writes poetry in a journal about her desires and her story.

Oppressive social definition cannot completely annihilate her subjectivity. She says, “I used to tell my brothers that I had a piece of strength that I kept to myself, only to myself” (Biehl 79). Under certain levels of secrecy, Catarina cultured her subjectivity. The division of the frame in this piece is the creation of a space of secrecy or of a separate existence. The subjectivity of the individual continues to exist despite conditions that suppress and ignore it.

Through my development of a series of pieces that represent these various modes of individual relationships to surface, I expand on the two possibilities Calvino delineates in the beginning. Catarina’s example evades the pressure to live in a photographable way through secrecy. Nausea reveals the necessity for some sense of surface or definition to deflect from. This series is by no means exhaustive. It only depicts certain individuals in particular existential states. But through material explorations complexities and new questions arise.

Most importantly however, through this series I developed physical representations that aim to unite century long divisions between dichotomies such as, presence and absence, personal and political, physical and conceptual. The presence of two parts in one piece, opposes the this or that manner of approaching these dichotomies and instead proposes an approach that finds creation somewhere in the tension between the two.

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